Rocky Mountain Marshals ● 1

Ambush of the Heart

Mary Connealy

5

© 2026 by Mary Connealy

Published by Bethany House Publishers
Minneapolis, Minnesota
BethanyHouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Connealy, Mary, author.
Title: Ambush of the heart / Mary Connealy.
Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2026. | Series: Rocky Mountain marshals ; 1
Identifiers: LCCN 2025023198 | ISBN 9780764245992 paperback | ISBN 9780764246067 casebound | ISBN 9781493452460 ebook
Subjects: LCGFT: Christian fiction | Romance fiction | Western fiction | Fiction | Novels
Classification: LCC PS3603.O544 A84 2026 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20250625
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2025023198

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Design Source Creative Services, Dan Thornberg

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and postconsumer waste whenever possible.

This book is dedicated to *my* cowboy.
We're coming up on fifty years together. Yee-haw!

I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people.

Hebrews 8:10

One

July 1872
Near Fort Collins, Colorado

U.S. Marshal Owen Riley was riding beside Delaney Bridger and her brother, escorting them to Fort D. A. Russell in Wyoming, when a bullet whizzed past him, so close he felt the heat of it.

Owen threw himself at Delaney to get her off her horse. It was a reflex without thought. He held on to his reins and urged his well-trained buckskin mustang stallion to lie flat on its side. He saw fellow Marshal Morgan Sawyer hit the ground a mere second before he did. A third Marshal, Tex Mitchel, was already down, crouched low behind his horse, rifle drawn and aimed. Tex was bleeding.

Tex had Delaney's brother, Boone Bridger, lying on the ground as well. The team of Marshals had been paid to get the Bridgers safely to Wyoming, and fortunately Delaney looked all right. She lay next to Owen with her pistol in hand. Her horse, meanwhile, took off down the hill they'd just crested.

Assessing things fast, Owen noticed Boone sprawled on his back, bleeding from a head wound. Clive Duncan, the prisoner they'd been transporting, was facedown and not moving. Clive was right beside Marshal Marley Tweedt, who'd been leading Clive's horse as the man rode with his hands tied together. Just beyond those two, Deputy Marshal Stan Ross, also lay flat on his back, arms flung wide, unmoving, and bleeding from a chest wound.

The horses that hadn't been forced down continued to stand. Owen knew they were well-trained horses, including their prisoner's horse, as he'd supplied that mount himself.

Gunfire continued to rain down.

Stan's spooked horse was trotting north, downhill, in the direction they'd been going. Other horses, trained or not, followed. Only Owen, Morgan, and Tex had managed to hold on to their mounts and had their critters down, acting as shields.

They had all just come out of a draw and then crested a hill. Of course, only someone from Colorado would call the rolling, rising mounds in these parts mere hills. Yet when you came upon a mountain close to hand, sure enough, they looked like hills.

They'd been skylined for just a few seconds on the trail to Cheyenne, riding north out of Denver along the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains, when they walked right into an ambush. Five of them shot, four seriously. Marley's leg bled, the wound bad enough that he'd let his horse get away. Marley had crawled toward Tex, the closest shelter, and got his gun out, not paying his injured leg much mind.

Another glance at Tex told Owen he was bleeding but still in action.

There was a pause in the gunfire, a rifle. It'd sounded to Owen like a Springfield rifle, which carried an impressive load of bullets.

One gun. The rifle fire let up, then came more bullets about the time it would take to reload. But was it one gun or just the same kind of gun and multiple riders close together? Owen had learned not to jump to conclusions. Then he heard something, a grunt maybe, and the gunfire stopped.

Owen was pinned down near the top of the hill. He had his rifle out of the scabbard, resting it over his horse's back, ready for the next round of gunfire.

But moments later, no one showed himself, and there were no more gunshots. Regardless, Owen stayed where he was, ready for someone to come charging over the hill. In the silence, a mountain breeze kicked up the acrid scent of gunfire, which to Owen smelled like brimstone. It was as if the whole world had gone dead still except for the buffeting breeze.

With a glance back at Boone, he saw Delaney leaving the safety of the horse, her only shield. He quick grabbed her arm. "Don't you dare go out there."

She turned to him, furious, and cried, "I've got to help Boone."

Owen's grip gentled. "He's down now. No one can get another shot in him. But if whoever opened fire on us comes over that hill, you need to be behind this shelter." He gave his poor horse a little pat. He hated to reduce the loyal critter to shelter.

No more guns sounded.

She nodded. "Yes, it would be foolish, I know that." She swallowed hard and swiped a wrist across her eyes. "I s-suppose he can't get worse in a few minutes' time."

"I'm sorry, but it's my job to keep you and Boone safe. I failed with him." It ripped at Owen's heart to see her cry, to see her brother bleeding from a head wound.

She calmed down and saw reason. It seemed she was a tough western woman. And pretty with her dark hair and blue eyes. He hated that he'd failed her brother, but he could still protect her. His hand on her arm felt a little too warm. He let go to face the hilltop and aim his gun again.

And then she was gone.

"Delaney! No!"

She'd dodged him neatly and was crawling, using her elbows to pull herself forward while staying flat.

He added *wily* to his other description of her.

He didn't go after her but instead focused on the hill, ready to stop anyone who posed a threat to her.

She was soon beside her brother, where she tore a strip off his shirt to bind his wound. But it was an ugly shot to the head, and Boone remained limp on the ground.

He, Morgan, and Tex had partnered up before. Two other Marshals had ridden with them today, both of them now laid out on the ground. Stan Ross's eyes were open, staring at heaven 'cause that was where he'd gone. Just a youngster. He hadn't been with the U.S. Marshals Service for a full year.

Marley Tweedt, a tough Civil War veteran, was the oldest of them and mean. Alive but hurt bad. Owen had seen gunshots like this before. Unless he got real lucky, Marley was going to lose his leg—if the wound didn't fester and kill him first.

Owen sensed his temper about to explode, but then his gaze landed on Delaney. The young woman had formed a bandage around her brother's head. She looked around desperately, her eyes locked on Owen's. "He's alive," she called.

Owen didn't believe it, and yet at the same time he had to. Then he did a blamed-fool thing. He left the shelter of his horse and crawled over to Delaney.

She drew out a wickedly sharp knife. For a second or two, Owen was afraid of the fury in her eyes and the weapon in her hand, but then she slashed at her brother's shirt, making another strip of cloth to bind his head before Owen reached them.

What Owen saw when he got closer to Boone gave him hope.

"The wound looks mean, but it's a graze," Delaney said as she tied the bandage around the pad she'd formed, just enough pressure to stanch the bleeding. "He's going to live!" She said it with such force and certainty, Owen figured God himself had assured her of the fact.

Delaney's pa was newly stationed at Fort Russell. Though she'd never made such a claim, it was said she was a distant cousin a few times removed to the rugged mountain man Jim Bridger. She sure seemed tough enough. Owen suspected she could've survived in the mountains with that old grizzly hunter. Same went for Boone, whose toughness just might save him.

They were on this trail because the train that ran from Denver to Cheyenne wasn't operating due to a wreck that tore up a stretch of track, which included a trestle bridge along the route. No one was making promises about when it would be running again.

A half day's ride by train had turned into a few days' ride on horseback. Clive Duncan needed to be escorted to Cheyenne, where he'd been sentenced to hang. He'd broken out of jail a year ago. The Bridgers, Delaney and Boone, had been standing on the station's platform ready to board the train at the same time as Owen and his group. When they found out Owen was changing plans to ride horseback to Cheyenne, the Bridgers asked if they could come along. They wanted to get to Fort D. A. Russell, where their pa, Colonel Lionel Bridger, was the commander.

"Get back to watching for whoever shot my brother," Delaney instructed, crawling on toward Marley.

Morgan rounded his horse and scrambled on hands and knees for the crest. It seemed to be safe so long as they kept low. They headed for the top of a grassy knoll that rose from the rugged land. But the gunfire had come from over this same hill, and Morgan didn't like getting shot at more than any man Owen had ever seen.

And Owen feared that this time his friend was gonna die.

"Morg, no!" Owen hissed. "Let's fall back. Now. That's an order."

Owen expected to be obeyed.

Morgan looked over his shoulder. The pure fury in his eyes would have scared a lesser man, but not Owen. He respected it, but at the same time, Morg was going to do as he was told.

Owen lowered his voice so as not to give themselves away to whoever had been shooting at them. "We need to find a better spot to make a stand. Sure as shootin' they're after our prisoner."

Morgan gave the crest one more enraged glance, then turned back. Instead, he went to the prisoner. Tex, his blood-soaked arm now with a kerchief wrapped around it, got to work loading Stan's body onto his horse. They were far enough over the hill that the horses could stand, but no one was going to dare sit up high on their backs. Not until they'd put some space between them and whoever was shooting at them.

The prisoner was loaded next. Morg was a bit gentler with Marley, but he still hurriedly slung him, belly down, over his saddle.

Delaney guided her horse downhill, Tex leading the way with Boone limp across his saddle. Delaney kept her eyes fixed on her brother, and Owen could see the anger in her expression that her injured brother was being handled like this. Yet along with her outrage was the grim acceptance that they had to get moving.

The men who'd shot them would be coming.

As they neared Boone's horse, Tex managed to grab its reins and swing up into the saddle while still leading three horses, one with Stan's body, another with the utterly still Boone, the third with a writhing but silent Marley. He had a tourniquet around his lower leg, almost ensuring they'd need to amputate it later.

Soon Tex was out of sight around an outcropping of stone.

When Morgan reached the rocks, he turned and rode uphill.

Then Owen mounted up, trotted around the stones, and caught up to Morgan. “Let’s make a run for Fort Collins,” he said.

Morgan glanced back at him. “That’s too far, at least for Marley.”

Usually when Owen gave orders, he expected them to be obeyed, but he knew how to listen, too. He looked at Morgan. “Where then?”

They were closest to Elk Point, Colorado. Going there meant Owen would be bringing danger to a small town ill-equipped to face it. While there was no longer a fort in town, Fort Collins was bigger and the nearest place to offer safety. But they’d have to make it there while fighting a running gunbattle the whole way, with Delaney right in the middle of it.

“I know this land. We’re going right up that slope.” Morgan pointed to the mountain right in front of them. A mountain with no way up, not on horseback.

“Move out, and fast.” Morgan spurred his horse straight toward what looked very much like a dead end. If that was true, they’d be trapped and under the guns of the outlaws in minutes. Yet Owen didn’t protest. Morgan was the toughest of a real tough bunch. If he said they could ride up the side of a mountain, Owen was going to spur his horse too and try to keep up with him.

So Morgan took the lead. Tex, without a word of complaint, fell in as well, leading his trio of horses that carried the wounded. Owen wondered if Tex was as worried as he was at the prospect of scaling the wickedly steep slope.

Delaney came next, her jaw clenched, her eyes flashing with grim determination.

Just minutes later, Morgan rode up a slope so steep it seemed impossible. Tex was next, trusting his horse, riding at a gallop. Delaney climbed right behind him as though she and her thoroughbred bay gelding could fly. Owen glanced behind him before urging his own horse forward, half figuring he’d see gunmen coming after them any second.

Morgan was already out of sight, and Tex vanished as he rounded a jumble of rocks, Delaney not far behind him. After following, Owen got there in time to see Morgan climbing the jumble of rocks and setting himself up to shoot any attacker who dared to show his ugly face.

Tex moved Marley to the ground. Since Owen was the best of the three at doctoring, he went to Marley and got to work.

Delaney checked Boone’s head wound, who had yet to so much as groan.

“It’s not as bad as I feared.” Owen removed Marley’s tourniquet, and the gunshot wound immediately started bleeding again. Fortunately, the leg was still warm, as the blood flow hadn’t been cut off for very long. And the leg didn’t appear to be broken. A bone broken by a bullet was usually more than broken; it was shattered, with fragments of bone scattered around inside, making it near impossible for the limb to heal properly. Thankfully, it looked as though the bullet had penetrated deep into the muscle of Marley’s leg but had missed the bone.

A gunshot sounded from below them. Their pursuer was coming fast, unloading his gun again. Bits of rock exploded right by Morgan.

Morgan opened fire. One shot.

There were none in return. Owen heard hooves pounding below but they didn’t come closer. If anything they were moving away from them. And no one did any more shooting.

“Morg can probably hold off an army from here.” Tex looked away from Marley, who lay with his teeth gritted while Owen retied a new bandage, but not so tight that circulation was cut off to the stubbornly bleeding leg. “Reckon I oughta help him, though.”

“Does the leg need to come off, boss?” Though his grizzled face flushed from pain, Marley didn’t protest or howl or swear. A lot of men would have done all three.

“Nope, you’re gonna keep your leg and heal up fine so long as the wound doesn’t become infected. And we’ll see it doesn’t.”

Marley, already flat on his back, seemed to collapse further as the tension leeched out of him. The man hadn’t complained about Owen’s rough doctoring skills, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t been fearing maybe losing his leg. “How’s Ross?”

Owen looked at Marley, shook his head sadly, and didn’t say a word.

“Good man, Ross. He was still a youngster and deserved better. It’s the Duncan family’s doing, I reckon.”

This time Owen’s eyes slid to their prisoner, Clive Duncan. “If the gang was coming to set Clive free, they didn’t do him no favors. If he dies, I reckon those polecats will blame us even with their bullet in his gut.”

“I got the first one up the slope, the one who shot at me,” Morgan said from his perch on the boulder that overlooked the trail they’d come up on. “They can’t get up here while we’ve got the high ground, and they know it. But they ain’t goin’ nowhere either.”

“I had no hope they’d be easy on us,” Tex said in his drawl that reminded everyone that he’d gotten his name from his days as a Texas Ranger. “They already broke Clive out of the jail at Fort Russell. It figures they’d keep at it. The fool had gotten away clean, but he had to wander into a Denver saloon and get himself rounded up again.” Tex shook his head. “I’ll see to him before I go shoot it out with his family.”

“How far are we from where you’re aiming, Morg? Or is this it?”

“This ain’t it,” Morgan replied, moving behind a stack of boulders. But there was no more shooting from below, so Morgan just watched.

Owen noticed Delaney kneeling beside her brother, tending to the thick bandage around his head. He saw her lips moving and figured she was praying as she worked on him.

Owen had seen a graze to the head like that a time or two before. Usually there was a good amount of bleeding, but other than stanching it, there wasn’t much to be done. Stitches maybe, once the bleeding stopped, but there wasn’t time for that now. The stitches would probably bust open during the long ride anyway.

Tex gave Marley a pat on the arm and went to check Clive, who was still unconscious.

“How’s his belly wound?” Marley asked.

“Hard to say. I’ll stanch it, then leave him tied up, even if he is unconscious. He’s a mean one. I don’t want him getting into a fight.”

“I saw seven men, with six of them scattered among the trees at the base of the mountain. I thinned the herd by one—the one who was shooting at me.” Morgan kept to his spot, still watching. “They can’t get any closer, not with there being no decent cover. They’ll be looking for another way up, but there ain’t one.”

“How do you know this land so well, Morg? You’re from Colorado, right?”

“My pa has a ranch up here. But it’s a rattlesnake of a trail to Pa’s place. Long ways from here, but easier to defend. He ain’t gonna be happy seeing me bring a group of strangers home for dinner with outlaws after us.” More quietly he added, “He ain’t gonna be all that happy seeing me either.”

Owen didn’t ask about that. He’d never learned much about where Morgan Sawyer had come from. But Morgan was the finest tracker Owen had ever seen, and he’d seen some good ones. He was mighty good himself. But no one could top Morgan Sawyer.

Delaney rose from her brother’s side and walked over to Owen. “What needs doing?” she asked.

“Nothing much, Miss Bridger. I think your brother will be all right, but he might be addled for a while. A bullet graze like that takes some time to heal fully.” Owen looked up at her from where he was crouched next to Marley. He saw such fire in her eyes, he felt burned just looking.

“If there’s no work to be done, show me where the men are who shot Boone so I can blow them all straight to the devil.”

Owen flinched at the fury flashing from her eyes. He had a feeling the Duncan Gang oughta just run for their lives straight out of Colorado, maybe out of the country. She might not be able to find them in China.

But he knew better. The Duncans weren’t gonna run. In fact, they were going to keep coming. And instead of Delaney being smart and hiding behind him like she should, she was going to give Owen all he could handle to keep her from unleashing her revenge.

And probably getting herself killed in the process.